

**Soul of the Tiger: Searching for Nature's Answers in Exotic Southeast Asia**, by Jeffrey A. McNeely and Paul Spencer Wachtel. Doubleday, New York, 390 pp. (1988), \$19.95.

Upon first picking up this book, its title and the background of the authors led me to high expectations. I thought that a book had finally come out not only clarifying the historical ties between man and nature in Southeast Asia, but indicating ways in which governments and conservationists could deal with it within the framework of modern society. I was somewhat disappointed.

As a personal account of two men's long years in Southeast Asia, and as a documentation of some of the lore and history of the region, this book is enjoyable, sometimes riveting, reading. However if there was supposed to be a greater meaning beneath the surface of some of the writing, it was not intuitively obvious to me. Among all the personal anecdotes, I was constantly wondering exactly where the book was leading. It was not until some of the later chapters that I was able to tie together some of the author's ideas and possible solutions. By then I felt it was too little, too late.

"Soul of the Tiger" leads us through a series of what the authors call "ecocultural revolutions". The first such revolution, the large scale use of fire, was one of the earliest events that began to reshape the face of Southeast Asia. These early changes already started to affect man's use of wildlife and cause drastic vegetational shifts. The second revolution, the domestication of plants, allowed for a much more efficient use of land space and thus opened up seemingly unlimited possibilities for human expansion. By Chapter 4 we come to Asia's third major ecocultural change, that of "wet rice" agriculture. Here the authors explain the very important fact of how rice has been much more than just a crop in this part of the world, but the basis for some of the civilizations which existed here in the past. They explain how the relative richness that resulted from this new agriculture allowed the people to indulge in the ornate architecture and grandiose ceremonies that affected their view of life and their relation to the world around them. In Chapter 5 we are brought to Southeast Asia's jump into the global marketplace, the fourth ecocultural revolution. Here one can see how such a move accelerated the region's loss of forest and wildlife through more intensive agriculture and a greater use of natural resources, the products of which were then sent overseas. Again the face of Asia was changed, and this change meant the squeezing of the remaining forests and wildlands into smaller and smaller pockets.

Between Chapter 5 and Chapter 30, I was lost more than once in a bombardment of animal symbolism that included everything from the king cobra as a strong phallic symbol to the relationship between white elephants and the Lord Buddha. Along the way are also tales concerning were-tigers, head hunters, and even the abominable snowman. The main connection between these chapters is the idea that wildlife has been a powerful force in the development and maintenance of Southeast Asian cultures. However the connective thread seems loose indeed. Mixed in with these chapters, the authors begin to discuss some very important conservation issues such

as the timber trade, the wildlife marketplace, captive breeding, and dam construction. Upon a second reading of some of these sections, I was able to weed out some very interesting facts and controversies regarding these issues. But I felt that such issues, which are at the forefront of conservation biology, should have been more clearly brought out and expounded upon by two men who have spent such a long time in the region.

Not until Chapter 30, the last chapter of the book, do we finally make it to the fifth ecocultural revolution – or at least a hope of what the fifth revolution might be. Terms such as “self-sufficiency” “local responsibility”, “symbolism” and “spiritualism” are used to show how conservation could be much more fully achieved on a local level. This idea, which has been put forth in several forms by other anthropologists, seems perfectly logical but does nothing to get at the root of modern day problems.

The major concept that McNeely and Wachtel try to stress towards the end is that conservation in Southeast Asia is “more a social challenge than a biological one.” I am in partial agreement with them on this, but I consider it both a social and a biological challenge. In any case, I would have liked to see this point made earlier in the book and built upon. Although such a concept may seem intuitively obvious, this type of thinking seems to have escaped many individuals involved in resource planning and management. Furthermore, the biological challenges, which have gone virtually unaddressed in Southeast Asia should not be understated. Though social factors have often been wrongly ignored in conservation planning, so have biological factors due to a paucity of data and a general lack of interest in good applied research. Both need to be better integrated in future planning.

The major question in my mind, however, is what are these social and biological challenges that need to be addressed? I would have liked to see more in this book documenting some of the biggest conservation problems facing Southeast Asia such as the illegal procurement and trade in timber and wildlife, unregulated and often sanctioned encroachment on the edges of protected forests, virtually nonexistent management policies concerning issues such as fire and wildlife, government sponsored reforestation projects on already existing natural forested areas, and the blatant corruption of much of the political machinery whose job is to protect the natural resources. How do you begin to deal with problems such as these? For whatever reasons, this book sorely falls short in this area.

Overall I have mixed feelings regarding this book. If you are interested in a pleasurable book about some fascinating tales and historical background of Southeast Asia by two men who experienced it firsthand, then I recommend “Soul of the Tiger”. However, if you are looking for some hard documentation of the problems and potential solutions concerning conservation in Southeast Asia at the present time, then I’m afraid you must look elsewhere.

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